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SUBJECT: THAI MFA FIELD TRIP SEEKS TO EXPLAIN PREAH VIHEAR

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1.(SBU) Summary. The Thai say they support Cambodia's application for World Heritage designation of the Preah Vihear temple but feel that the Thai perspective has not been adequately considered. After the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok objected, the Thai MFA decided to cancel a trip it had arranged for third country diplomats to visit the temple and instead only take the group to the adjacent Khao Phra Wihan National Park area in Thailand to present their side of the story. End Summary.

12. (U) At the invitation of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, econoff went on a field trip with a group of foreign diplomats to Sisaket Province March 20-21. After disembarking at a point where the temple could be seen at a distance, Touchayoot Pakdi, Director of the Boundary Division, Department of Treaties and Legal Affairs, Thai MFA, briefed field trip participants on the history of the boundary dispute and the current status from the Thai perspective. An archeologist showed field trip participants the quarry where the Thai say the stone for the temple came from and the ancient dam that was built to create a small reservoir, Sra Trao, to supply water for the temple. The proposition that the reservoir is man-made is central to the Thai view that the World Heritage inscription must include Thai territory that was historically part of the temple complex. The Thai also argue that Cambodia and Thailand must jointly manage the area adjacent to the temple unless and until there is a final demarcation resolving overlapping claims.

13. (SBU) According to Thai officials, the Cambodians have moved a goods market, which caters to tourists, from Cambodian territory on the temple grounds to disputed territory outside the base of the staircase entrance. The Cambodians running the market, the Thai say, are careless in their waste disposal and are polluting Sra Trao, adding to the tensions in the area.

14. (SBU) Prior to the trip, the Embassy of Cambodia in Bangkok sent the following diplomatic note to the embassies of each country that had been invited, protesting the planned visit.

Begin text of diplomatic note:

The Royal Government of Cambodia considers this kind of field trip, officially organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, without asking for prior authorization of the Royal Government of Cambodia constitutes a voluntary violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Cambodia. In this connection, the Royal Embassy of Cambodia kindly asks the esteemed Embassies not to join the said trip in order to avoid problems which could eventually occur on the ground.

End text of diplomatic note.

15. (SBU) After receiving this note, post contacted the Thai MFA and learned that they decided not to take field trip participants to the actual temple or into any disputed territory, but only to the adjacent Khao Phra Wihan National Park. From Sra Trao on the edge of disputed territory, the delegation was able to see the temple plateau through binoculars. A Cambodian helicopter perched near the temple and Thai soldiers were stationed along the trail.

16. (SBU) Econoff received conflicting reports about the degree of Cambodian upset and the reasons for the helicopter. One Thai official told econoff that the helicopter was there not as a threat but to bring the governor of Preah Vihear province and a few other Cambodian notables to greet the delegation. According to him, Thai Prime Minister Samak mentioned the upcoming field trip to the Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister during a recent official visit to Cambodia, who in turn told Samak he would make sure a party was there to greet the delegation. This Thai official told econoff that when it became apparent that the delegation was not going to enter the temple, the Cambodians waiting on the temple plateau were upset at the no-show. He also said that it seemed that the Cambodian MFA and Deputy PM's office were not on the same page on this issue, given the protests the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok had made. Another Thai official told econoff that the helicopter was there to back up the words in the Cambodian diplomatic note and was not there to welcome the delegation.

17. (SBU) Econoff asked the Thai MFA's lead border demarcation official whether the Preah Vihear dispute is more difficult to resolve than a separate conflict over competing maritime boundary claims. The official responded that Preah Vihear is definitely the more difficult of the two, because the revenue at stake in potential oil and gas concessions offshore provides more incentive for the parties to come to resolution on the maritime dispute. With Preah Vihear, the financial stakes are lower, but cultural sensitivities much higher.

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